

Journalism and Democracy: Does it Matter How Well the Press Covers Iraq?

by Peter Levine

Why should we care about press coverage of Iraq? What does it matter, for example, if *The New York Times* does a terrific job or, upon examining its own work, finds fault with how it reported the run up to the war? What does it matter if *Times* Public Editor Daniel Okrent flays the newspaper for overstating some claims and understating others in its coverage of the war?

The answers to these questions depend upon the purpose of journalism in a democracy. Given that journalism serves a mass audience made up primarily of citizens, how one sees that purpose depends on how one defines the work – the obligations, if you will – of citizens in a democracy.

For political theorists, this is a central question, as old as Socrates. But theorists do not focus enough attention on citizens' use of the mass media. For journalists and journalism professors, the obligations of citizens should also be a central issue. One cannot evaluate the quality of news coverage without asking what readers, listeners and viewers should *do* with the news. In turn, that means asking what obligations we have as citizens.

Promoting Dialogue among Journalists and Political Thinkers

At the University of Maryland, we pulled together a team of investigators from the Philip Merrill College of Journalism and the Institute for Philosophy and Public Policy to explore the relationship between journalism and democracy. We examined coverage of the war in Iraq to address three central issues: (1) the uneasy relationship between national security and civil liberties in a democratic society; (2) freedom of information, and especially press access to information in time of war; and (3) the implications of a professional military for the health of a democracy. We posted commentaries on these issues on a website – see www.puaf.umd.edu/IPPP/iraq -- and held a seminar with our colleagues at the university to think out loud about the issues.

Our purpose was not mainly to create a public website on the war, but rather to explore how better to link journalism and political theory. We looked for texts in democratic theory that address two basic questions. First, how do democracies make decisions – such as the decision to go to war – and how ought they to? Second, what are the relationships between rights, such as individual rights to privacy or the public’s right to know, and responsibilities, such as the individual or collective responsibility for national security?

It was easy to find public statements by political theorists and philosophers that directly concerned the war. To name only University of Maryland colleagues, Bill Galston was one of the first prominent Democrats to oppose an invasion of Iraq. In June 2002, he argued that a preemptive attack against a foreign threat would overturn fifty years of American policy and undermine international law as well as American interests.¹ Likewise, Benjamin Barber has published op-ed pieces critical of the war in *The Guardian* (Britain), *El Pais* (Spain), *La Repubblica* (Italy), *Libération* (France), the *Frankfurter Rundschau* (Germany) and the *Los Angeles Times*. However, these articles are basically policy critiques. They are not distinctive products of political theory or philosophy.

Political theorists and philosophers have contributed articles on very general, perennial subjects that are central to their discipline and are also relevant to the current war. Consider, for example, David Miller’s article, “Holding Nations Responsible,” which appeared in *Ethics* just as President Bush was calling for an invasion to hold Iraq responsible for allegedly violating international law.² Characteristically, Miller’s article makes no specific or explicit references to the looming war. It would take a skillful act of translation to make its relevance clear to a broader audience.

¹ William A. Galston, “Why a First Strike Will Surely Backfire,” *The Washington Post*, Jun 16, 2002; pg. B.01.

² *Ethics* 114 (January 2004): 240-268

Looking for political theory that might link more closely and naturally to journalists' needs, our team identified and posted on the web page a series of philosophical articles on the draft, on retaliatory war and on just-war theory.³ And we scoured current publications (mostly Web-based) for timely materials on press access during wartime, civil liberties versus national security, and the ramifications for a democracy of an all-volunteer military. Of the three topics, journalists considered wartime press access the most timely and controversial.

For the most part, journalists have produced two kinds of work: a vast quantity of material directly on the war (with philosophical implications that are usually left implicit); and critical analysis of the media itself. The media's self-criticism has concentrated on issues that a newspaper's ombudsperson such as Okrent might consider. For example, is it appropriate to show very graphic images of casualties? Is press coverage of the Bush administration fair? Should al Qaeda tapes be replayed on U.S.-based broadcast channels? Should the press accompany the President on a secret trip to Iraq without announcing the visit in advance? Do "embedded" journalists forego the ability to report objectively?

Perhaps the best piece of media criticism was written by Susan Moeller, a journalism professor at Maryland and author of *Compassion Fatigue: How the Media Sell Disease, Famine, War and Death*, and *Shooting War: Photography and the American Experience of Combat*. Moeller found that "Poor coverage of [weapons of mass destruction, or WMD] resulted less from political bias on the part of journalists, editors, and producers than from tired journalistic conventions."⁴ More specifically, she argued that:

- In the "inverted pyramid" style, an announcement by a major figure is reported in the lead, and critics are quoted much lower down. This convention allows the administration to dominate news coverage, even when critics are more credible.

³ www.puaf.umd.edu/IPPP/iraq/philosophers.htm

⁴ Susan Moeller "Media Coverage of Weapons of Mass Destruction," available from the Center for International and Security Studies at Maryland (CISSM) at www.cissm.umd.edu.

- The White House has consistently set the agenda, determining what issues are prominent at any given time. When administration officials are not talking about WMDs, there is little coverage about them. Furthermore, heavy reliance on quotations allows officials to slip highly controversial and weighted terms (such as “terrorist state”) into news stories.
- National security issues involving highly technical matters are especially subject to distortion, because reporters have few well-informed sources other than political officials. [This is nothing new. In 1798, Madison wrote to Jefferson that “the management of foreign relations appears to be the most susceptible of abuse, of all the trusts committed to a Government, because they can be concealed or disclosed, or disclosed in such parts & at such times as will best suit particular views.” Nevertheless, reporters need to rely less on off-the-record comments and be more alert to spin.]
- The press personalizes issues, treating Saddam Hussein or Osama bin Laden as the problem and speculating about their personal motives. This approach overlooks the role of scientists, bureaucrats, international rules, and popular opinion overseas.
- Journalists are uncomfortable reporting uncertainty, for example, that we don’t know whether al Qaeda has chemical weapons. Instead, they often report statistics, even if those are irrelevant or uncertain.
- U.S. media enterprises cover the world from the United States, with decreasing space and attention to foreign perspectives. This means that WMDs are described as potential threats to the United States, when often the gravest dangers are in places like South Asia. Since neither the current Bush Administration nor the previous Clinton Administration wanted to emphasize the threat from WMDs stored in Russia, this story was underplayed, compared to stories about Iraq.
- The worst stories were filed by reporters who covered WMDs as part of U.S. politics (for example, as the subject of fights between Secretary of State Colin Powell and Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, or between the President and the Democrats); when reporters used anonymous sources; and when they signed “nondisclosure agreements” in order to get access to the Iraq battlefield.

What Role Must Citizens Play, and What Kind of Press Do They Need?

In the course of the project, we discovered that there was a very large gap between the topics discussed in political theory and in journalism. Political thinkers were not writing about the choices that confronted reporters and editors on a daily basis. Journalists were not writing about the war in such a way as to illuminate profound and perennial issues. When Galston, Barber and other theorists expressed public views in the mass media, they drew their basic facts from news sources, but not in a way that would promote dialogue between theorists and journalists about their respective professions.

There is a particular framework that ought to engage both political thinkers and journalists. Philosophers and political theorists are actively interested in *citizens' obligations* during times of war. This is why some of them are currently debating reinstatement of the draft, because conscription is a particularly onerous form of obligation. Meanwhile, many thoughtful journalists and journalism professors are deeply dissatisfied with the general quality of war coverage. However, they do not explicitly state what purpose the press ought to play in a democracy. The purpose of the press is controversial, but it is related to the obligations of citizens. After all, the impact of the press is mediated through the public, which is its audience. Therefore, we must first decide what obligations *we* have as a people, in order to decide what role our press should play, in order to assess the performance of the press in the Iraq war. An investigation of citizen obligation would connect to the main concerns of political theorists and to the day-to-day choices that face editors, producers, and reporters.

Although hardly anyone explicitly addresses the purpose of the press, here are some assumptions that seem to be implicit in current writing:

1. A citizen's main responsibility is to decide whether the Bush Administration has done a good job so far, and to vote accordingly this November.

Some people feel passionately that the Bush Administration has been awful--either wicked or incompetent--and that the election results in November should reflect this verdict. For them, it is very disturbing that a majority of Americans still believe that Iraq

was providing substantial support to al Qaeda, that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction (or a major WMD program) on the eve of the invasion, and that world opinion is largely favorable toward the war.⁵ They believe that each of these beliefs is false, that the contrary positions make the case against Bush, and that the press is responsible for failing to convey the truth.

Other people have the same view of the function of the press (to inform citizens who are going to vote yea or nay on the Administration's performance to date), but they believe that Bush is a decisive, visionary leader. To them, it is deeply frustrating that the press emphasizes casualties and conflicts in Iraq, rather than America's work in rebuilding the country. Many of them were incensed when the press reported setbacks in the initial ground war, which quickly turned into a rout of Saddam's forces.⁶

In my own view, citizens need to do much more than vote retrospectively on a president, once every four years. A president's performance in his first term does provide *some* evidence about how he would behave in the next four years, although this evidence is very imperfect. But if all I'm supposed to do is make a retrospective judgment of competence, and it takes a lot of my time to get adequately informed, and there are many other important issues besides Iraq, and 100 million other adults will also vote, I'm not sure it's worth my trouble to follow the war closely. Furthermore, I don't see a reason to care about the quality of news coverage if each citizen's role is so limited.

If the role of the press is to help us make decisions in national elections, then we could ask for fewer retrospective stories and more challenging questions about candidates' plans for the future. During the President's April 13 press conference, reporters asked him: "Do you feel a personal sense of responsibility for Sept. 11?" "Do you believe the American people deserve [an] apology from you ...?" "Will [the Iraq war] have been

⁵ Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA), "Americans Continue to Believe Iraq Supported Al Qaeda, Had WMD," April 22, 2004 (www.pipa.org/OnlineReports/Iraq/html/1). PIPA is a joint program of the Center on Policy Attitudes (COPA) and the Center for International and Security Studies at Maryland (CISSM), School of Public Affairs, University of Maryland.

⁶ See, for example, www.thatliberalmedia.com/.

worth it, even if you lose your job for it?” “One of the biggest criticisms of you is that ... you never admit a mistake. Is that a fair criticism?” “After 9/11, what would your biggest mistake be?” “I guess I wonder if you feel you have failed in any way?” These were variants of the same question: What kind of a human being have you been so far?

Instead, reporters could have asked forward-looking questions. For instance, in whom will sovereignty be vested on June 30? Does UN Envoy Lakhdar Brahimi get to decide? Can we negotiate with Muqtada al-Sadr, or must he be destroyed? Will the Iraqi government have veto power over U.S. military deployments? What changes do you anticipate making in U.S. intelligence agencies? How will democracy be restored in Pakistan?

Or they could have asked deep strategic questions. For instance, do terrorist groups still rely heavily on state sponsors? What is our policy toward repressive governments (such as Uzbekistan) that help us fight al Qaeda? Is terror a tactic or an ideology? Does Iraq need a multi-party democracy, and if so, what kinds of parties are acceptable? Is a peace settlement between Israel and the Palestinians a precondition for Mideast peace?

So why did reporters pose so few substantial questions? One answer is that they are thoroughly immersed in the campaign horse race. The way the current campaign is shaping up, it's a contest to see which individual gets to occupy the Oval Office. One contestant is reliable, passionate, but maybe arrogant, stubborn, and not too bright. The other is smarter and personally courageous, but he flip-flops a lot. Given this framework, the press mindlessly asks the first contestant, “Are you stubborn?” He says no, and they report that this proves the point.

2. Policymakers will respond to polls, so poll results should reflect good judgment.

This is actually a variant of Number 1, but it adds an important wrinkle. We don't just vote in November; in addition, we are polled at frequent intervals. Perhaps poll results shouldn't matter, but they do influence policy. If 90 percent of the public wanted us out of Iraq, we'd probably be heading out. Thus it's important that people pay attention and base their opinions on good evidence and careful consideration of alternative views.

Unfortunately, the American people deserve no better than a “B” for knowledge and effort, according to Pew Center studies of public attentiveness and knowledge.⁷

It’s undeniable that surveys matter. But it’s not clear that they should. Nor do I have a very strong obligation to inform myself and to participate in discussions about Iraq *just in case* a pollster decides to call me. It would be better to draw a random sample of Americans, tell them that their opinions will really count, and demand that they do their homework so that everyone else can get on with their private business. This is the Deliberative Polling idea--somewhat utopian, but worth thinking about as an alternative to our current system.

3. We are morally complicit in what our government does, so we should understand the results and feel appropriate emotions.

People who implicitly hold this view believe that we are part of a democratic community, so we are morally required to associate ourselves with the actions of the U.S. government. If Americans are brutally killed by terrorists, we should know all the details and feel a desire for vengeance. If American soldiers are killed, we should grieve for them and their families (and perhaps vent anger against the leaders who sent them into danger, *if* we think that the war was unnecessary). If our bombs kill Iraqis or Afghans, then we should see pictures and read accounts of what has been done. If people rage against the United States in Baghdad, Athens or New York, we should read what they say so that we can either take patriotic offense or come to share their judgment. Looking away from any of these events is a dereliction of our moral duty.

For their part, news organizations have an obligation to describe events in all their emotional power. Thus it was right to show the bodies of American contractors in Falluja, and we should all view the coffins of the American dead. Indeed, we should probably ask for more challenging fare. The balance is wrong: We get too many heart-warming stories about Jessica Lynch and too few disturbing ones about the Iraqis and Afghans who are killed or abused by our forces.

⁷ On the project website at www.puaf.umd.edu/IPPP/iraq/public.htm.

There are potential criticisms of this position. Perhaps we shouldn't engage too emotionally with current events, because our job is to be sober and judicious judges of policy. Or perhaps we have no obligation to read upsetting news or see upsetting pictures, since we aren't very complicit in this war. We are not *intentional participants* in the group that's fighting.⁸ I might say: I didn't vote for Bush, nobody consulted me before they decided to invade, and I don't need to wallow in the bad news that has resulted. Finally, one could argue that the focus of our emotional engagement shouldn't be Iraq. Sadness about deaths thousands of miles away is cheap; we should spend our time worrying about the local homeless, because we can help them.

4. The press is a watchdog or whistle-blower.

According to this thesis, it doesn't much matter what average Americans think or know about Iraq. The purpose of the press is to "blow the whistle" when the government really messes up or does something unethical. The audience for such stories need not be especially large. It may be various elites. In extreme cases, the only people who have to read an investigative news report are members of Congress and officials in the Justice Department, who will use the data in their legal actions against the administration.

It's clear that the press has played this watchdog role well, from time to time. Watergate is the classic case. Susan Moeller's paper, described earlier, suggests that reporters failed to "blow the whistle" on exaggerated claims about Iraq's WMD program, with disastrous results.

However, there are several drawbacks to the idea of press as watchdog. First, the only tribunal that should really judge a president is the people. So unless the people pay attention to the full range of news (good as well as bad), a president will not be fairly judged at the polls. If congressional committees, special prosecutors, and bipartisan

⁸ This is the definition of "complicity" defended in Christopher Kutz, *Complicity Ethics and Law for a Collective Age* (Cambridge University Press, 2000).

commissions become the bodies that assess presidential performance, democracy is weaker--and we risk criminalizing policy mistakes. Thus the press is a good watchdog only if large numbers of people act on the basis of what they read. If they act by voting, we're back at Number 1 (above).

Second, the press has a legitimacy problem. No one elects the White House press corps to be Tribunes of the People. If we don't approve of *their* performance, we can't remove them. A skillful populist can discredit reporters precisely by making this point. Indeed, Bush's approval ratings rose when reporters began to hammer him on Iraq, presumably because a lot of Americans view the president as more their representative than the networks and major newspapers. Jay Rosen considers this phenomenon in a subtle essay.⁹

Finally, it really doesn't make much *business* sense to imagine printing a national newspaper or running a cable news network for the benefit of 300 powerful policymakers. The news that appears on TV and in print must interest masses of people. This tends to distort any effort to investigate the details and complexities of alleged government misbehavior.

5. Citizens Can Do More than Vote.

We don't just observe policy and render occasional judgments. We can also do "public work." In relation to Iraq, we can choose to: organize political movements for or against the war; debate and try to develop policy alternatives for our government to adopt; follow the reconstruction effort closely to learn lessons for our own local work in battered American communities; develop relationships with individuals abroad and with immigrants in the United States (in order to strengthen America's "soft power" and make us more responsive); raise money for NGOs like the International Rescue Committee; and even enlist in the military.

⁹ Rosen, "Bush to Press: 'You're Assuming That You Represent the Public. I Don't Accept That.'" PressThink, http://journalism.nyu.edu/pubzone/weblogs/pressthink/2004/04/25/bush_muscle.html

There are good philosophical reasons for this position, but also some practical obstacles. Many forms of engagement are very hard or cannot reasonably be undertaken by most Americans. For instance, approximately 0.04 percent of the American population is serving in Iraq. If we increased that number tenfold, we would still only be able to include four tenths of one percent of the American people in direct work “on the ground” in Iraq.

Getting good information about Iraq is difficult, since much of the most important data is classified or inaccessible to Americans.

Also, a lot of movement-building, advocacy, and deliberation work really aims to change other Americans’ opinions. But what’s the point of that, other than to help them cast the correct vote next November (see Number 1 above)? If voting is a weak form of citizenship, then trying to change other people’s votes is not much better.

6. This war and occupation is a tremendous opportunity for us all to learn about profound and perennial issues.

Although we should never welcome a war because it provides “teachable moments,” the events in Iraq do provide opportunities to examine democracy, power, tyranny, military force, cultural differences, law, civil liberties, Islam, Christianity, economic development, and even human nature. We ought to understand these issues, because they arise in our own lives and communities; because they are intrinsically interesting and morally serious; and because the views that we form in response to the Iraq war will not only influence next November’s vote – they will shape every decision we ever make about national politics.

If we accept this rationale for war coverage, then we should expect the press to be an excellent educator, providing diverse opinions and useful information relevant to profound and lasting issues. We shouldn’t much care why George W. Bush ordered the invasion, but we should ask what are the necessary conditions for democracy to take root. We should also be interested in such perennial questions as: Should societies use the

talents of people who have committed wrongs in the past (for example, former Baathists in Iraq)? What potential for good and evil do we see in Americans under stress, and how can we strengthen our best instincts as a people? How can a government respond when the popular press is fomenting hatred and violence?

7. The “few-to-many” press is not important; it’s the “many-to-many” dialogue that matters.

All the previous answers focused on the mass media: the broadcast networks and major newspapers. But today there are said to be three million blogs, not to mention countless listservs and printed newsletters. Most of this communication is not focused on Iraq, but a substantial portion is. There may be one million people who have created public, accessible commentary about the war and related issues. Perhaps we should prize this conversation. It is intrinsically interesting, it may shape broad public opinion, and it’s so international that it may increase cross-cultural understanding. The paid, professional press still has a major role to play, providing most (although not all) of the basic information that feeds into these informal, public debates. But if we care most about the informal discussion, then we should ask whether the professional press is doing a good job in providing raw material.

To conclude: If we can decide why citizens need to be well informed about the war, then we can ask what kind of press they need and how they should use the available media. It is our overall conclusion that raising this question would be the best way to promote discussion between journalists and political theorists.

What follows is my personal view of a citizen’s obligations in times of war.

Being a Responsible Observer

I think that we ought to understand what is going on in Iraq—not just the daily body count, but deeper questions like: How much needs to be done before the United States can leave the country in Iraqi hands? Some percentage of the infrastructure that must be created before we can leave Iraq has been built, and some percentage was destroyed

during the last week. (“Infrastructure” means buildings, power plants, army and police units, political parties, newspapers, etc.) From reading various observers, one might conclude that 10 percent — or 80 percent — of the infrastructure is now ready. It all depends on whether one looks at an aggregator of news stories who has an anti-war stance, like Juan Cole; a major news organ like *The Washington Post* or the BBC; a collection of Iraqi blogs; or a news-aggregator who supports the war, like Andrew Sullivan.¹⁰

The truth is not just in the eye of the beholder; there is a reality to be understood. But we face extraordinary disadvantages in trying to understand it. Much of the important information is classified or otherwise secret. It is too dangerous for reporters to go everywhere and to talk to everyone. Eyewitnesses have narrow perspectives, and those with a bird’s-eye view don’t know enough details. The culture of Iraq is distant, complex and internally diverse. There are also practical and logistical problems. For instance, the BBC occasionally polls Iraqis. The results are mixed and complex, belying what many pro- and anti-war partisans might believe.¹¹ However, survey samples are usually unrepresentative even when we can reach most people by dialing random phone numbers. In 2001, there were only 2.9 telephone lines per 1,000 Iraqis,¹² so random-digit dialing is out of the question, and I have no idea how reliable any survey is.

All this leaves us with primitive methods for assessing information. We assume that eyewitnesses know something, so we hang on their words. (Yet eyewitnesses can be especially unreliable, over-influenced by the concrete sights they have seen.) We prefer named sources to unnamed ones, even though people may speak the truth off the record.

¹⁰ www.juancole.com; www.buzzmachine.com/archives/2004_04_11.html#006804;
www.andrewsullivan.com.

¹¹ Barbara Plett, “Iraq’s Hopes Split Along Class Divide,” BBC News, March 18, 2004 (news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/3522602.stm). Most Iraqis felt that they were better off after the invasion than before. Iraqis were evenly split on the question of whether the Coalition troops should stay. But trust for the forces was extraordinarily low.

¹² UN Human Development Report, Human Development Indicators 2003, www.undp.org/hdr2003/indicator/indic_346.html

We discount positive news from officials and proponents of the war, even though they could be correct. (By the way, I spend a lot of time on the pro-war sites, because I desperately want things to work out, and the conservatives collect all the good news.) We believe those sources whose values most closely approximate our own, even though one can have the right values and be wrong about the facts.

As a general rule, I think citizens should avoid such shortcuts and try to use solid information. For example, you don't have to listen to Democrats and Republicans argue about the federal budget and discount each side because all politicians have selfish agendas. Instead, you can actually look at federal budget data and make up your own mind. But the "fog of war" makes that kind of analysis impossible in Iraq.

In the absence of reliable information, we are especially likely to take refuge in ideology, to use *ad hominem* arguments (calling our opponents traitors or war-criminals), to deploy easy analogies, or to withdraw altogether from citizenship into spectatorship. Or, despairing about our ability to understand (let alone influence) this foreign war, we may concentrate on matters that we *can* understand, like the next presidential election. But imagine what an Iraqi would think if she knew that Americans were following the uprising in her country because of its effect on their own electoral politics--this would seem the height of callous self-indulgence.

I don't really know the solution, but I think that all of us should be somewhat cautious about our own judgments and open to arguments from the other side. We should look for constructive opportunities rather than wish that our domestic political opponents are damaged by the war. And we should hold onto hope, even if we believe that the invasion and occupation were grave errors in the first place.

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